

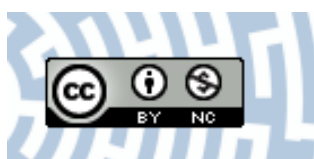


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Title: Fear of Success among Students – Range and Predictors

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Fear of Success among Students – Range and Predictors

Abstract

The paper presents the results of research into fear of success in Polish students. The participants were 208 university students of psychology, education, political science, and physical education at the School of Physical Education. Horner's projective method (1972, 1978) was used. The analysed variables were sex, study major, average grades, locus of control, Machiavellianism, and masculinity and femininity.

Fear of success was observed in more than half of the investigated students – 62% of men and 48% of women. Multiple regression analyses showed that masculinity and Machiavellianism were the best predictors of fear of success. Fear of success occurred the least frequently in the students of physical education. The regression model explained 11% of the fear of success variables.

Keywords: *fear of success, gender, masculinity-femininity, Machiavellianism*

Introduction

Fear of success consists of the expectation that being successful will cause negative results and much more unpleasantness than a lack of success did. However, it is not identical with anxiety about failure, lack of task activity in general, or with longing for "peace and quiet." It is rather connected with experiencing conflicting feelings of both the desire for success and a fear of it associated with anticipating and experiencing high psychological costs. As a consequence, people who are afraid of success do not frequently realize their potential possibilities because they retreat from their aspirations and behave in a defensive way (Horner, 1972, 1978).

In psychology, Sigmund Freud was the first who, based upon his clinical experience, paradoxically described results caused by success by reporting stories of patients literally “devastated” by success. Mental disorders appeared in those people the moment they achieved the success for which they had been striving.

In her research into motivation of achievement in the 1970s, Martina Horner took up the notion of fear of success as strongly connected with the role of women, whose traditional place in society is in conflict with being successful. In her investigations she used a simple procedure that required finishing a story about Anne (John) who is the best medical student. As many as 65% of the female students and only 10% of the male students finished the story in a pessimistic way, saying that the woman who was successful became lonely, ill, neurotic, or she eventually lost her high social position. According to Horner, those responses were indications of fear of success strongly connected with the stereotypical understanding of a woman’s role. This fear in women is strongly connected with the sense of loss of “full femininity” and success is perceived as threatening to femininity. Fear of success also occurs in men. The kind of expected negative consequences of success differ in the two genders. In women this fear is caused by the concern for social rejection and loss of attractiveness to the opposite sex, whereas in men the fear is caused by the uncertain value of success itself. The concern about negative consequences of success in men refers not so much to fear of self-depreciation in the male role but to fear of continuously proving themselves and lack of a sense of security in the situation of success (Balkin, 1986, 1987; Paludi, 1984; Rothman, 1996; Zuckerman, Wheeler, 1975).

The review of research done in the 1980s (Paludi, 1984) showed a tendency to fear of success in a higher percentage of men than Horner observed (1972, 1978). Paludi’s analysis of 64 investigations showed that on average 45% of men and 49% of women obtained scores indicating fear of success. Horner and Paludi’s data showed men’s fear of success more frequently in the 1980s than the 1970s.

In Poland fear of success has not been investigated up till now. The objective of the presented study was determining the range of fear of success in Polish students of different majors from the perspective of their sex, personality variables such as Machiavellianism, locus of control, masculinity and femininity, and other individual variables such as average grades and interests, or specificity of majors. Majors differing in their specificity of success in the given domains of study were selected for investigation: psychology, education, political science, and physical education at the School of Physical Education.

Method

Fear of success: The projective method for studying fear of success suggested by Horner (1972, 1978) was used in the research. The respondent finishes a story: “At the end of the first year of study of ... (the investigated person’s major) it turned out that ... (a male or female name in accordance with the sex of the participant) achieved the highest average marks among the first year students. What happened next?”

In the analysis of fear of success, the author’s own quantitative and qualitative indicators prepared for the research were used. The quantitative indicators were determined using the method of competent judges on the basis of the number and dramatic development of the associations connected with the exposed story and described by the subjects. Ratings of the fear of success intensity were made on a 5-point scale: -2 = very high intensity of fear when the subjects described more than one negative event or one event but with a dramatic ending; -1 = high intensity of fear, when the subjects described one negative event; 0 = when the subjects described a neutral event; +1 = no fear of success, i.e. positive associations with success, when the subjects described one positive event and very positive associations with success, +2 = the subjects described more than one event or when it was a very positive event.

Sex Role: What was diagnosed in the subjects was masculinity (M) and femininity (F) and gender identity using the Bem Sex Role Inventory, 1974, in the Polish translation and adaptation by Kuczyńska (1992) (Cronbach’s alpha= 0.78).

Locus of control: Locus of control (LOC) was measured using the Delta Questionnaire; Rotter, 1966, in the Polish translation and adaptation Drwal, (1979) Cronbach’s alpha= 0.80) .

Machavellianism: The intensity of Machiavellianism (Mach) was diagnosed using the method Mach IV; Christie & Geis, 1970, in the Polish translation and adaptation by Pospiszyl (1985) (Cronbach’s alpha= 0.76).

The following data were analysed: subject’s gender, femininity, masculinity, locus of control, study major, average grades in the first year of study.

Participants

The subjects were 208 second year students (150 women, 58 men) of different majors of the University of Silesia and the School of Physical Education in Katowice, Poland: political science (N=60); psychology (N=43); education (N=57); and physical education (N=48 people).

Results

Among all the subjects, fear of success was observed in 108 investigated students, near half of all the group (51.92%), more often in men (62.07%) than women (48.00%) (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: Range of fear of success among investigated students

Fear of success	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fear of success	72	48.00	36	62.07	108	51.92
Lack of fear of success	78	52.00	22	37.93	100	48.08
Total	150	100.00	58	100.00	208	100.00

In the analysis of the obtained data, a stepwise analysis of multiple regression of all independent variables for the dependent variable – intensity of fear of success (or its lack) was carried out. In the analyzed model, the considered variables explained 11% of fear of success ($R=0.33$; $R^2=0.11$, $p<0.001$). The predictor of fear of success, i.e. lack of positive and presence of negative associations with success, is Machiavellian personality ($\beta=-0.178$; $p<0.01$) and masculinity ($\beta=-0.156$; $p<0.04$), whereas the predictor of lack of fear of success, i.e. existence of positive associations with success ($\beta=0.167$, $p<0.02$), is studying physical education at the School of Physical Education. Study average grades did not prove to be a predictor of fear of success. And neither were: other study majors, locus of control (LOC), masculinity (M) or femininity (F) (cf. Table2).

Table 2: Summary of the results of multiple regression for the dependent variable of associations connected with success (from +2 – lack of fear of success to -2 – fear of success)

Variables	beta	B	t	p
Sex (male)	-0.156	-0.51	-2.09	0.04*
Feminity	-0.082	-0.02	-1.12	0.26
Locus of control	-0.083	-0.04	-1.13	0.26
Machiavellianism	-0.178	-0.02	-2.48	0.01**
Average grades	0.103	-0.29	1.45	0.15
Pedagogy	-0.074	-0.22	-0.91	0.36
The School of Physical Education	0.167	0.58	2.31	0.02*

$R^2=0.11$, $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$

Discussion

The presented research showed that success has both negative and positive associations and fear of success in the investigated students appeared as frequently as lack of fear of success. The remaining students showed positive or very positive associations connected with success. Contrary to the American findings from the 1970s (Horner, 1972, 1978), saying that mainly women showed fear of success, among the Polish students investigated 30 years later this fear was more frequent in men. The men not only showed fear of success more often than the women, but also this fear had higher intensity in them. The male sex was, among many other measured variables (like study major, average marks, sense of control, Machiavellianism, masculinity, femininity) a predictor of fear of success occurrence.

It appears that women, more frequently than men, not only are not afraid of success but, on the contrary, they reveal a strong desire for success and positive associations connected with it. It is in accord with the tendencies, existing in the world since the 1980s, to the increase of the number of men experiencing fear of success (Paludi, 1984). Whereas, in Poland there are still a lot of traditional convictions that women are supposedly afraid of success, they do not want to make a career. They do not want to have managerial positions and they reluctantly get involved in professional activity.

On the contrary, the obtained results about fear of success show that it is contemporary Polish men who are more often afraid of success and they show negative associations connected with it. Undoubtedly, nowadays there have been far reaching emancipation changes in Poland and women, as well-educated, professionally active and successful at school or university, ceased to be afraid of them.

Generally, in the recent years, changes in the political system have taken place in Poland: from a planned economy to a market economy. There is a high unemployment rate and young people find it difficult to obtain jobs. This situation creates extremely difficult conditions for both women and men to be professionally successful.

At the same time, because of the traditional comprehension of social roles, there is stronger social pressure on men – as responsible for the economic well-being of the family – to be professionally successful. Thus, men in Poland, more than women, may fear the negative consequences resulting from a lack of professional success, but also feel a stronger fear of success understood as high costs connected with it, e. g., the necessity to maintain a job, competition, envy, jealousy, and personal problems. It seems that in Poland, men traditionally more than women, are still under social pressure to be successful at work.

These suppositions seem to confirm other obtained results. It was actually those who scored higher on Machiavellianism that appeared to have higher fear

of success. It was a stronger predictor of fear than gender. Seeking the answer to the question of the basis of the more frequent fear in men, probably men's slightly higher Machiavellianism could be indicated. In the author's other research (Mandal, 2002) a negative correlation of femininity with Machiavellianism and a statistical tendency to a positive relationship of masculinity with Machiavellianism were observed.

Thus, it may be supposed that men with high intensity of Machiavellianism feel fear of success the most strongly. On the one hand, they may strongly desire to be successful, but, on the other hand, they may have a negative vision of the world, in which the strongest and the most ruthless win. In this way, they may associate success with a high sense of insecurity and menace.

Fear of success occurred less in the students of the School of Physical Education. Doubtless, the specificity of importance and clarity of success in sports contribute to this. It is students of the School of Physical Education that are very often members of the national sports teams – they are frequently awarded medals nowadays. They are in the most optimal phase of life to be successful in their fields. Not only are they not afraid of success, but they are anxious for it and their associations connected with success are very positive, whereas success in professions that students of the remaining majors prepare for usually does not occur until middle-age. Thus, these students may experience fear of success as something unknown that is ahead of them in their professional lives. However, students of physical education as already experiencing success (or failure) know its consequences better. They are convinced that success has mainly positive outcomes. Thus, the basis for fear of success in students not yet experiencing success or failure may also be a fear of the unknown.

In planning their professional career university students have to take into account the difficult conditions connected with the transformation of a planned economy into a market economy in Poland to a greater extent than students that have experienced success in sport.

Generally, analyzing the obtained data it should be emphasized that in the regression model, the considered variables explained only 11% of fear of success. Therefore, the number of the cases analyzed in this study is not decisive in the phenomenon of fear of success. It is likely that there are a lot of other variables, not included in the presented study, which influence the intensity of fear of success.

The phenomenon of fear of success is very complex. There is an important social need for further research into this phenomenon as there are continuous moral changes in the world as well as changes in the political and economic structures. They cause, in turn, changes connected with new conditions in the workplace and changes of professional success.

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